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ABSTRACT

Statistics on the reading habits of adult Americans are grim. Surveys of teachers reveal inadequate and unimpressive figures in recreational and professional reading and awareness of children's literature. Studies show that, as a whole, teachers are not avid readers. Furthermore, older teachers tend to be more prolific readers of both recreational and professional materials. While personal recommendation is a most powerful tool for prompting students to read, it is doubtful that many teachers are knowledgeable enough about children's literature to guide students' reading choices. A study of 158 undergraduate education students from two universities confirmed these findings. Most did not read professional journals regularly, a majority did not have a favorite children's poet, and many did not have a favorite author for children. In a separate study, 65 undergraduate and 62 graduate students in reading-related classes were asked to set their own goals in recreational and professional reading and children's literature. Goals and choices of children's literature varied widely. Many chose "Instructor" and "The Reading Teacher" as their favorite professional journals. For recreational reading, students often selected magazines and newspapers. Research on the reading habits of adults clarifies the need for education students to become role models for young readers. (SG)

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COLLEGE STUDENTS AS READERS

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COLLEGE STUDENTS AS READERS

Reading Habits

The statistics on the reading habits of adult Americans are grim: 10% of the population reads 70% of the books while most adults never read for pleasure. Of the 159 members of the United Nations, the United States ranks a mediocre 24th in book production and 49th in literacy! The 27 million adult Americans considered functionally illiterate and the additional 35 million who have less than minimum survival skill comprise approximately one-third of the adult population. Their ranks are increased by 2.3 million each year (Larrick, 1987). Unfortunately, the data on the recreational and professional reading habits of adults in education is also disheartening. Surveys of pre-service and practicing teachers reveal inadequate and unimpressive figures in personal reading in three areas: recreational reading, professional reading, and an awareness of children's literature.

The lack of enthusiasm for, and involvement in, reading by those who teach it and stress its importance is serious, particularly since a frequently stated goal of reading instruction is the development of a lifetime habit of reading (Mour, 1977). Teachers have considerable potential for influencing the attitudes of their students toward reading. The acknowledged power of adults as role models for children is a fact that drives the companies who select athletes and rock singers to sell their products. Teachers serve as role models for the kinds of benefits and rewards that reading promises (Manna & Misheff, 1987).

Children are certain to be affected by the teacher who shows excitement and enthusiasm toward reading and just as likely to be influenced by the teacher who shows apathy (Mueller, 1973).

Review of the Literature

Research concerning the personal reading habits of teachers is relatively scarce and comparisons among studies are hazardous since both attitude and behavior are measured, typically with intact groups, and the methods for reporting results vary considerably. While some studies survey both undergraduates and practicing teachers, most focus only on the habits of teachers in the field. Nevertheless, those studies conducted had consistent results: as a whole, teachers are not avid recreational readers and the most prolific readers are the older teachers.

Personal Reading

Mueller (1973) gathered information about reading habits from two intact education classes, one of graduate students and one of undergraduates. Using a forced choice instrument where 42 respondents compared activities, only 23% of the undergraduates and 50% of the graduates preferred to spend an evening reading rather than watching television. Both groups reported that reading ranked fourth or lower as a leisure activity.

Mour (1977) conducted a stratified random survey of 224 graduate students with full time education-related jobs and found that only 22% reported reading even one, two, or three books per month. In this study, the bulk of the reading was done by 25% of the subjects. In fact, one hundred and sixty-two of the

professionals involved in the survey read two or fewer books per year.

In a survey of 170 teachers taking graduate classes, Worden and Noland (1984) found, as did Mueller (1984), that television watching was a favorite leisure activity. Sixty-seven per cent of their respondents ranked television watching as their favorite recreational activity. While 58% read the newspapers selectively only 21% reported that they read at least one book a month.

Gray and Troy (1986) surveyed 80 undergraduate upperclassman to determine what kind of reading they were doing on their own time. When asked if they were reading a book at the present, 64% indicated that they were not.

In an effort to discover what affects attitudes toward reading in the developmental stages, Manna and Misheff (1987) examined journal entries from 50 randomly selected subjects, 25 undergraduates and 25 graduate students. Among the intensive emotional responses given to the open-ended questions they found their sample named more positive factors out of school associated with reading than they did in school. The power of this information must be interpreted in light of the research of Anderson et al. (1988) concerning the few minutes outside of school that are actually spent reading. Recommendations from those surveyed included fervent request that teachers serve as role models, that they be aware of students preferences in reading, and that children be exposed to a variety of types of reading by an enthusiastic instructor (Manna & Misheff, 1987). Those who felt

they lacked a solid literary heritage considered themselves to be disadvantaged.

Professional Reading

The reading habits of teachers and education students with regards to professional materials has also been the subject of survey research. The very nature of our work demands that teachers be not only capable practioners but also competent scholars (Cogan & Anderson, 1977). Keeping abreast of the many issues on which teachers need information: mainstreaming, parental involvement, accountability, bilingualism, censorship, and teaching methodology requires ongoing professional growth, often through reading. The research in the professional reading habits of teachers consistently shows that teachers do little professional reading and the journals read are ones that contain practical teaching suggestions. As in personal reading, older teachers are more prolific readers than their younger colleagues.

Cogan and Anderson (1977) conducted a stratified random sample of 100 elementary schools in Minnesota to determine what type of professional reading was done by teachers. In the schools selected, a teacher from each grade level participated in the survey. The two most popular journals read were Instructor and Teacher. There was a strong positive correlation between the journals read and those that were available in the building library. Age was again a factor in determining professional reading habits, much as it had been in determining personal reading habits. Respondents between the ages of 20-30 read less than did

teachers over 50 years old. Cogan and Anderson (1977) concluded, in general, that teachers do not do much professional reading.

Mour (1977) also concluded that teachers do little professional reading; he reported that less than half of a sample of 224 graduate students read a professional journal on a regular basis. The journals read were pragmatic in nature: Instructor and Teacher. Worden and Noland's (1984) survey of 170 full-time teachers had similar results: the most popular journals were Instructor and Teacher and teachers with 11 years of experience or more were the most prolific readers.

An Awareness of Children's Literature

The classroom teacher is the most dynamic model of reading in the instructional world of the child. It is the teacher who must translate his or her own knowledge and enthusiasm about reading to children by exposing them to books and providing opportunities for recreational reading (Mangieri & Corboy, 1981). An intensive study of how children spend their time outside of school reported that, on the average, only four or five minutes a day was spent reading (Anderson et al., 1988). Therefore, the importance of in-school experiences that promote enjoyment in reading is magnified. At every level, teachers should devote their efforts to leading students into the exciting world of literature (Gray & Troy, 1986).

Even though we know that personal recommendation is a most powerful tool for instigating reading, it is doubtful that teachers are able to guide children and students in their selection of reading materials. Mangieri and Corboy (1981) surveyed 571

elementary teachers and administrators in three states to determine their knowledge of children's literature and recreational reading activities. Ninety-one per cent of the respondents could not name three children's books written in the past five years; 71% could not even name a single book. When asked to name a children's book published within the past seven years according to literary genre, 98% could not name a biography, 91% could not name either a fantasy or science fiction book, 79% could not name a fictional title, and 97% could not name a poetry anthology. Only 11% could name three or more classroom activities that would promote recreational reading.

The results of a survey conducted for this paper support these findings. One hundred fifty-eight undergraduate education students from two universities were surveyed concerning their reading habits. The findings reported above were confirmed. Eighty-five per cent of the students did not read a professional journal on a regular basis. In one class of all senior students, eighty per cent indicated they did not do any professional reading. Of the remaining percentage who did read professional journals, those read were pragmatic in nature: Instructor, Teaching K-8, etc. Even though all of these students were either taking or had taken a course in children's literature, 59% did not have a favorite children's poet and 39% did not have a favorite author for children.

The Need for Change

The research on the personal and professional reading habits of teachers in the field is clear. Their evident lack of knowledge of children's literature is also supported by research. Among the recommendations for a remedy for this situation is a call for change in the content of education courses. Teachers should be encouraged to read professionally though university courses (Mour, 1977 and Worden & Noland, 1984). Gray and Troy (1986) restate the need for teachers to be readers, "The teacher at all levels should devote his/her efforts to leading students into the other worlds that can be found in the pages of a book" (p. 179). They go on to recommend a change on the part of teacher educators in order to acquaint them with children's literature and instill in future teachers the desire to read and to see the importance of reading in their own lives as well as the lives of their students. Nanna and Nishef (1987) concluded their research of the personal development of a reader with a call for studies involving the subjective and transactional nature of reading.

The Project

Undergraduate and graduates students in reading-related classess were asked to set their own personal reading goals in three areas: recreational reading, professional reading, and children's literature. Sixty-five undergraduates, 11 males and 54 females, and 62 graduate students, 12 males and 50 females participated. To introduce the activity, the instructor prepared a bulletin board of magazine, journal, and book covers and shared her

own reading goals for the course. After the students wrote their personal goals the goal sheets were given to the instructor for perusal and then returned to the students for their anectdotal comments throughout the duration of the course. Goal sheet were collected at the end of the semester/quarter.

Of the 65 undergraduates participating, recreational reading goals varied. Thirty-six students chose fiction to read. Twenty-five chose non-fiction which included biographies and self-help books and four read classic literature. Twenty-two students read from more than one professional journal, with Instructor being the favorite choice. They chose from fifteen different education journals. The Reading Teacher, a personal recommendation from the instructor, was the second most widely read journal.

All of the undergraduates read at least one magazine or daily newspaper for their personal goals. Preferences in children's literture varied considerably, with the majority of the students choosing to read favorite authors or books appropriate for a specific age student.

The preferred professional journal of the graduate students was also Instructor. The second most widely read journal was Phi Delta Kappan. Students read in 20 different journals with 23 students reading more than one journal for the course. Thirty-two students read fiction, 15 read non-fiction, and ten read classic literature. Magazines and newspapers were also selected and read.

The goal sheets contained the personal reactions of the students to the assignment. Comments regarding the attitudes and experiences of the students have relevance to this study. Many graduate and undergraduates reported an enjoyment in reading for pleasure that had nearly been forgotten:

"I enjoyed the opportunity to set my own reading goals and work toward achieving them."

"This assignment was great! It gave me an excuse to read."

"This assignment made me re-evaluate my reading habits. I haven't read much for personal enjoyment for a long time. I thoroughly enjoyed the two novels. I had the first one read in three days."

"Thank you so much for this assignment. I haven't read a novel for years. My daughter cut three new molars during this session of summer school. I read my novel and rocked my baby."

"I think the most useful thing I gained from this assignment was the self-awareness that I had been slipping into aliteracy."

The emotional involvement with literature was reflected in the responses of the students:

"I've never had a great fondness for anyone from Texas (just because I don't know anyone) but after reading <u>Texasville</u> I missed

the characters for days. I'd think of them while doing the dishes."

"For my daily inspirations, I keep Bless Your Heart in my kitchen. While I'm cooking, I read these little thoughts."

"Of Mice and Men left me speechless."

"At least three novels I read had main characters and descendents with red hair. Is there something I should know?"

"Beaches made me laugh and cry."

"There should be Beaches II."

"Beaches was great. I gave it to my sister to read and she gave it to her sister-in-law."

"I thoroughly enjoyed Beaches. I purchased the paperback during a trip and read it til I finished it. I cried, laughed, and went through emotions I never realized I had."

"The best thing I did this summer was read The Count of Monte Cristo. I loved it!"

"I was spurred on to read a short Kurt Vonnegut play, "Happy Birthday, Wanda June." Now I want to read another of his novels."

"I would have missed something had I not discovered J. D. Salinger."

"No one can compare with Mark Twain."

"Love is Eternal was wonderful. In fact, seeing Abraham Lincoln's weaknesses as a husband and father helped me to feel better about my own husband."

Both undergraduates and graduated indicated that they had been affected by their professional reading:

"I had never heard of metacognition or deconceptualizing or activating a student's schema. I was so surprised by all the things I didn't know that I decided to remedy the situation by subscribing to a least one educational journal."

"The back issues of Instructor have solved my art class problem."

"In the Middle provided me with inspiration for teaching my literature course."

"I read The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby. I am now exploring the possibility of cutting this play down to a two or three hour show for production at the high school."

"I loved the journal, Young Children."

"All teachers should read The Hurried Child."

"One issue of The Kappan made me realize we need some changes in our use of in-school suspension."

"I spent a good deal of time with The English Journal - a fine publication."

"The Reading Teacher is a great professional magazine. I will continue reading it even after I graduate."

The third area for personal reading, children's literature, was also reported:

"I became obsessed with children's books this summer. When reading Beat the Turtle Drum I had a difficult time putting it down. I knew something tragic was going to happen. When Joss died, my first thought was to never let my daughters climb trees. And we don't even have any."

"You were right, Sara Plain and Tall is wonderful."

"I read everything Betsy Byars wrote. She is hysterical."

"I can't believe all the great books I missed growing up."

Conclusion

There is no doubt that we value literacy. It is also clear that any behavior we value in college students needs to be modeled by instructors. If education students are to become effective role models of reading and competent guides for their students then they must leave college with these skills. Inspiring education students to become active readers so that they can, in turn, instill those attitudes in children cannot be left to chance. Research on the reading habits of adults, and in particular, teachers, clarifies a need for change.

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